

POPE AND WORDSWORTH

The Age of Augustus is called the Classic Age of Rome, because it saw the glory and triumph of its literature in the masterpieces of the greatest authors of the Roman Empire. Italy's Classic Age was the generation in which Dante lived and wrote his immortal "Divina Comedia." The Classic Age of France was the age of Louis XIV. But "classic", as applied to the literature of the 18th century in England, is misleading, and does not conform to the true meaning of the word. It was rather a pseudo-classicism that sprang up among the authors of the time, influenced perhaps, by such men as Boileau and Rapin in France, who demanded that poetry should follow exact rules founded, they said, on the Greek and Roman classics.

The result was that poets lost individuality, looking only to the technique of verse-form and elegance of expression—the mere skeleton of poetic art. Poetry gradually developed mechanical and artificial qualities, lacking that depth of thought and fine feeling which so distinguished Elizabethan composition.

The most famous poet of the time and the acknowledged leader of the new movement in England was Alexander Pope, who, despite the antagonism and bitter criticism of his enemies, attained to first place among his contemporaries. He was born in London in 1688, passing the greater part of his boyhood with his parents, who shortly retired to a country home near Windsor. Mainly because of his delicate constitution and physical deformity, he received scant education at school, and after his twelfth year was practically self-educated, browsing among English books, eagerly devouring the classics, and writing poetry. With his usual vanity, he announces his ability as a verse-maker in the lines:

"As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came."

Pope is probably the most unfavourably criticised of all poets. During his life-time, he strove by fair means and foul to revenge himself on all those "carping critics and hired defamers" of his work. It was to this end that the "Dunciad" was published, a monumental example of his bitter satire. The philosophical "Essay on Man" is denounced by critics for its superficiality in doctrine and for the complete absence of poetry except in form; it is perhaps the best known and the most quoted of all his works. The "Essay on Criticism," a summary of the art of poetry as first taught by Homer, established his reputation as a writer of "neat, clear, sparkling, and elegant verse"; while after the publication of the "Rape of the Lock," Voltaire called him "the greatest poet of England and at present, of the whole world." Just how correct, Voltaire was in his universal judgement we are not prepared to estimate, but the poem was undoubtedly Pope's masterpiece; DeQuincy declared it to be "the most exquisite monument of playful fancy that universal literature offers," while another critic calls it "the perfection of the mock-heroic."

Yet Pope was not a great poet; dwarfish in soul and body, his outlook on life became narrowed and distorted. To gain his ends, he resorted to falsehood, treachery, and deceit. He had no knowledge of nature, consequently no love for it, and the bulk of his work is one great satire on humanity, which, Long says, can hardly be placed with our great literature, for great literature is always constructive in spirit. Pope's art consisted in his wonderful gift of clothing in graceful language obvious, commonplace truth; in this he has no equal. But this was not sufficient for the permanence of a work and, as a result, his theories have died, due in great part to the life-work of William Wordsworth, who made it his mission to drive them out of existence.

Between the democratic tendencies in the political world and in the world of literature at the beginning of the

19th century, there is a striking analogy. The French Revolution of 1789 had announced to Europe and America that the old regime was at an end and that a new order of things had been set up in its place. Nine years afterwards appeared the "Lyrical Ballads," the combined work of Wordsworth and his friend Coleridge, proclaiming to all a new literature with new ideal, ademocratic literature, treating of "Nature unadorned," and of life in its simplest forms. The publication of the work although it attracted small attention at the time, and met with nothing but contempt, has since come to be regarded as one of the most important events in the history of literature, for between the lines could be detected the assertion of Wordsworth's purpose—to free English poetry from the slavery of that artificial diction to which Pope and his school had adhered as to hardened conventionality. The transition would be a great one, and undoubtedly Wordsworth had taken on himself a tremendous task; yet he steadfastly clung to it with all the courage and firmness of his convictions until he achieved success.

With the mechanical precision, methodical "correctness" and laboured monotony of Pope's school he had no patience, preserving throughout his work the simplest style at his command, absolutely free from bombast of word-use and sentence-structure. He maintained, moreover, that the peasant, devoid of the artificiality and affection of urban surroundings, presented a far better subject for artistic treatment than the man of refinement. Hitherto, humble and rustic life had been frowned upon as a subject not in keeping with the character of poetry. He would correct the false notions of his precursors; he would view common life under the illuminating light of a sympathetic imagination and give it its true place in literature; this was the key-note to his theory of poetry—the supremacy of the imaginative over all the other faculties of the poet. But perhaps he went to rather questionable lengths in his endeavor to uphold his side of the argument,

for frequently we find that, with the exception of "Peter Bell," Wordsworth's rustic heroes are veritable store-houses of wisdom, speaking things that are not often given to a man to utter, and probing into philosophic depths that would lead one to suppose they had spent long years in the acquisition of Platoniclore.

And so, Pope and Wordsworth, in common with the rest of mankind, have erred. The one, relying solely on ornamentation and beauty of language, stifles those sentiments of mind and heart which constitute the soul of poetry; the other, in his efforts at simplicity of diction and conformity to nature, gets rid of all ornamentation and occasionally creates characters not as true to life as they might be. It is not their faults, however, but their virtues that we must consider. Which of the two is the greater poet? Critics disagree; some few favour Pope, but it is the opinion of the majority that the poet of nature, who said of his own verse:

"The moving accident is not my trade,
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts;
'Tis my delight, alone, in summer shade,
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts."

chose the greater theme and that he completely overshadowed Pope, the idol of 18th century Classicism.

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